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DRUMMING AND PARKINSON'S DISEASE

By: Dr. Connie Tomaino, DA, MT-BC

"I once worked with a young person with Parkinson's disease who had trouble initiating movement. I explored different rhythm patterns with him. We then made a cassette of different kinds of African drumming that he seemed to find very stimulating and helped him get moving. Anytime he had to walk across a street, whereas in the past he may freeze, he would put on his headphones and listen to African rhythms to get to the other side without freezing in the middle of rush hour traffic. We know that rhythmic cueing works because we have seen it clinically. The underlying mechanisms of how it works is what we are trying to understand better. Freezing in Parkinson's disease is when the person can't initiate movement and literally stops in his or her place. No matter how much he or she tries, he or she can't move. It seems as if the person's will has been removed. Even though the anticipation and desire is there, the patient's body doesn't respond to the signal.

"A man who was in our short-term rehabilitation program had a stroke, and he had a left side hemiparesis which means he wasn't paralyzed, but he did lose sensation in the left side of the body. He was in our physical rehabilitation program and was going to be discharged to the community, but he was still shuffling his left leg and literally dragging it. His physical therapist felt he wouldn't be safe walking outside without supervision. The optimal goal for him was to walk independently with a cane. They asked me if there was something we could recommend with music to help him feel his body so he could sway and lift his left side to get a sensation of lifting the leg even though he had limited feeling. I asked his physical therapist to measure his safe walking speed which was the same rhythm as one of Nat King Cole's songs, "Walking My Baby Back Home." I asked him a couple of times a week to walk comfortably to the song, but what he did was interesting. Instead of just walking to it, he did shuffle steps, moving backwards and forwards, almost as if he were dancing.

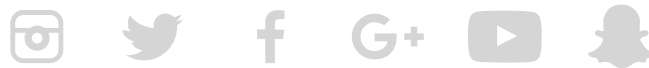
"He said he felt like, in listening to the music, he needed to move more, telling me he hasn't danced since he was a kid. It appeared as if the memory of dancing was still there, and the body wanted to move that way.

"In less than two months he was able to lift his leg on the beat, absolutely coordinated in time. In fact, at the end of two months, he actually got the sensation back again so he could again feel the floor. Some might say this is normal recovery, but our guess is that because he was using his leg differently, activating a muscle memory for dancing, there was indication that there is a different motor schemata in the brain for different muscle activity. When you walk you use one, when you dance you use another since it incorporates tempo. Perhaps that kicked in. This is hypothetical. We know clinically that this ability exists. We are trying to prove it scientifically. In this case, the rhythm was more important than the melody, since it was the rhythm at the tempo at which he could walk that initiated the change. The melody helped him sing the song himself and helped him to self-integrate those rhythms."

Drumming and Paralysis

Arthur Hull, a well-known drum circle facilitator, describes an experience involving a woman who used drumming to regain motor function after she was paralyzed.

"I did a program in Mill Valley in a hospital once, and a lady came up to me and told me this story: She had been involved in an accident that paralyzed her. The doctors gave her almost no hope of regaining any movement in her body from her waist down and told her that she had to acknowledge this limitation and live with it. She decided not to. She had upper body movement, and she started playing doumbeks, talking drums and bongos. Because she was a dancer, she didn't think she could live if she couldn't move her legs. She started imagining and moving her body from her prone position, any movement she could manage while she played the drum with her upper torso. She called it "micro muscle movement dancing." Slowly but surely, larger and larger movements occurred to the point that she could wiggle her toes, then move her body, until finally she could sit in a chair and play larger drums. After four years of constant drumming and dancing in this way, she became a dancer again, though now she is a drumming dancer or a dancing drummer depending on her mood. She now has full movement of her body, and she is graceful and beautiful."



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